THE VATICAN

Cardinal M. Czerny: "The Church must weep with the cry of the poor".

Cardinal Michael Czerny S.J. entered the Jesuit Order in 1963 and was ordained a priest in 1973. He has worked in the field of social justice apostolate in Canada, Central America, Africa. Since 2010 he has been working at the Vatican. He has been created Cardinal by Pope Francis on October 5, 2019, preceded by episcopal ordination the day before. Palabra has interviewed him.

Giovanni Tridente - January 8, 2020 - Reading time: 10 minutes

From the faith received in the family, to the forced migration to a foreign country as a rejection of communism, to the apostolate in the peripheries of the world, with an eye on migrants and refugees, themes that he has been dealing with at the Vatican

since 2010, Cardinal Michael Czerny, has a comprehensive experience in the themes of "care for the last ones". A special moment in his life is the recent creation as a cardinal by Pope Francis, without forgetting his contribution to the Synod of Bishops on the Amazon.

-Eminence, how did your priestly vocation come about and when did you decide to enter the Society of Jesus?

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I begin by saying that I received my faith from my family, from the Catholic school, from the communities in which I grew up. Grounded in a good Catholic formation, I discovered over the years that Christ is the center of my life, and I discovered this through experiences, witnesses to the faith, choices and my own life of prayer.

The call to enter the Society of Jesus came early in my life, when I was still a student at *Loyola High School* in Montreal, and after graduation I joined the Jesuits in the then called Upper Canada Province. I strongly felt the desire to serve God and my neighbor in the community, to use my God-given talents, to live in freedom.

-Since you were a child, also for family reasons, you had to live in different countries, leaving your native Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic). Do you feel a bit of a migrant?

Yes, I was only two years old when we had to leave our home. I remember the desire to live in freedom and the consequent rejection of communism. As a family we were very grateful to Canada for their welcome. We always grew up conscious of having had to leave Czechoslovakia and conscious of having been helped by a merciful family. A few years later, our parents also took in others who were in trouble, including a refugee from the 1956 Hungarian revolution who lived with us for half a year. In one way or another, we are all migrants.

-For almost ten years you worked in Kenya founding the African Jesuit AIDS Network. What do you remember about those years?

I remember that, as all over the world, Jesuits in Africa tried to walk with the most needy, proclaiming the Gospel and responding to the most urgent injustices, among them HIV (AIDS)... All from faith in Christ, together with others.

The work of the African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN) that I started in 2002 continues in very capable hands. They are using the same foundations and developing the skills to foster a sense

of empowerment and liberation, a spirituality of compassion. Faith-filled people bring the health and joy of Christ to those most in need. I especially remember the life testimony of one of them: "I was as good as dead, and they helped me to come back to life".

-Your experience has often led you to deal with social justice issues, also with positions in the Roman Curia. Do you think that "awareness" of these issues is urgent for the Church and for society?

More than an urgency, I believe that the Church cannot fail to look at and address issues of social justice. God hears the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth, and responds by calling us to participate in his response, with creativity and discernment. I make my own the words of St. Teresa of Avila: "Yours are the eyes with which God looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which the Holy Spirit blesses the whole world".

-Is there a danger of reducing the Church to an NGO, distorting its evangelizing mission?

There is a risk of being like an NGO if we strive to build the Kingdom, but without Jesus. It is always good to remember that we are collaborators with Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. We therefore need a life of prayer that allows us to listen to and discern the will of God. Prayer helps us to maintain balance. We also run the risk of wanting to live a following without participation in the building of the Kingdom, a Christianity that seeks to be "pure" and then becomes walled in and remains without relationship, without "Kingdom".

Men and women experience themselves as sent, on mission; they seek to listen, communicate, accompany, always in relationship, collaborating in order to respond in the best possible way. The Lord gives us the gifts for this. As Pope Francis says: it is only when we forget this mission, and forget poverty and apostolic zeal, that ecclesial organizations slowly slip into an NGO or an exclusive club.

-Many accuse the Pope of being too interested in "the last ones" with a political rhetoric (communist?) and not enough in giving value to doctrine. What do you think about this?

Concern for the "last," for the least, for the weakest, is at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus not only spoke of mercy, but he was mercy incarnate. When we go to meet the victims, we will encounter the victimizers and the structures of sin that wound and take the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters. If Jesus had shut himself up in the temple, no one would have bothered with him, but Jesus did not shut himself up, nor did he remain silent. Jesus denounced injustice, reached out to the outcasts, ate with sinners, healed pagans and called others to do the same. His actions and his life irritated many; then, they conspired and sought to silence him, even leading him to death on a cross. Pope Francis does not say or do anything new, he only lives the Gospel. Whoever reads this in ideological terms, perhaps needs to get closer to the Gospel.

-What do you think of the rhetoric that considers migrants and refugees as threats to States?

Migrants are not a threat, but it is not easy to believe that when faced with a bombardment of information that distorts the truth. I can affirm many positive things about people who migrate, but it is not enough. We have the challenge to present the reality with transparency, to let the facts communicate the truth directly to us. For this to happen we have to give them the floor: let them enter into dialogue with the societies of arrival, transit or reception. This helps us to formulate a fair judgment based on respect for others and compassion.

This is one of the missions of the Migrants and Refugees Section: not only to speak well of migrants, but also to bring about an encounter between those who arrive and the society that receives them. This is the only way to combat fear and develop solidarity.

-It is undeniable that in many places there is a great deal of "confusion" about reception issues; and, on the other hand, many innocent people lose their lives crossing the Mediterranean. Is there a concrete solution to which we can aspire?

Yes, of course, but we must insist on the plural: many concrete solutions. To expect a single complete and perfect solution is only to neglect the problem and allow it to prolong and worsen. Thank God, there are rescue missions inspired by the Gospel or by humanist motivations that help many to save their lives and reach the mainland. There are humanitarian corridors. There are many Mediterranean people - in Spain, France, Italy, Greece - who help to rescue and welcome. There are ongoing talks for European states to fulfill their national and international obligations. And we have the Global Compact, agreed a year ago by very many countries to promote and facilitate safer, more orderly and regular migration, something that benefits both the people who migrate or flee and the people who host them.

So, although the news that makes the most noise are the ones that are published, there are many examples of welcome in parishes, Catholic schools, Church movements. And they are not limited to instances of faith, but extend to people of all ages, of all beliefs; an expression of the fundamental humanity that unifies us.

-In your episcopal coat of arms, in addition to the reference to the Society of Jesus where you come from, you see a boat in the middle of the sea with a family of four people, a clear reference to the issue of immigration. How did you make this decision, which has generated some criticism in some circles?

Yes, the upper part of my shield reproduces the Jesuit coat of arms, representing the Holy Name of Jesus, his crucifixion and his glory. It illuminates everything, like the sun. The lower part displays a boat carrying a family of four. To me the message is simple: the boat evokes a common means that displaced people use to seek a better life elsewhere. But the boat is also a traditional image in the Church: the Boat of Peter, which has a mandate from the Lord to "welcome the stranger" (Matthew

25:35), regardless of where the Church is located. In addition, the boat serves as a reminder of the works of mercy towards those who are excluded, forgotten or neglected. If we continue to look at the shield, the water below the boat represents the Atlantic Ocean that we had to cross with my family when we emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Canada in 1948.

-Not content with this, he has chosen as his pectoral cross one made from the wood of a boat used by migrants to cross the Mediterranean. His is a very direct message....

Every bishop or cardinal visibly wears the Cross of Jesus Christ around his neck and on his chest, and already 20 centuries ago St. Paul called it "scandal" and "folly. My pectoral cross reminds us of the crucified of our times and raises the question: "Where do I see Jesus crucified today? It is a message of what I have had to live, of my mission.

-Have you received any criticism for having been created a cardinal (October 5) without being a bishop yet (ordained the day before)?

I have not heard any criticism in this regard. On the contrary, I have heard the positive surprise of some: realizing that in our Church of almost 20 centuries the Pope has called for the first time a priest under 80 years of age to serve as a cardinal. God and the Pope know what they have seen in us, the 13 appointed on September 1, but it is not for us to speculate, but to help the Holy Father in his mission. In his letter to us, the Pope explained what this appointment really means: "The Church is asking you for a new way of service... a call to a more intense personal sacrifice and a coherent witness of life".

-For your part, how did you receive the Holy Father's decision to call you as his direct collaborator, elevating you to the dignity of Cardinal?

On September 1, I was on the outskirts of São Paulo in Brazil, participating in a meeting of Latin American Popular Movements preparing a contribution for the Synod on the Amazon. Again, in his letter to the new cardinals, the Pope explained very well what he means: "May this new phase of your life help you to emulate Jesus more closely and increase your capacity to feel compassion for all men and women who, having become victims and slaves of so many evils, look with hope for a gesture of tender love from those who believe in the Lord". I therefore welcome the Holy Father's decision as a mission.

-We have recently experienced the Synod of Bishops on Amazonia, of which you were one of the two Special Secretaries. What do you think is the most important thing that came out of the Assembly?

There are many fruits, much richness that can be found in the final document. But perhaps I can underline the experience of *synodality*to walk together. To feel the peace and consolation that came from the experience of feeling guided by the Spirit and recognizing so many gifts, to feel the call to respond to a particular reality and to respond together, yes, to the cry of the

earth and of our brothers and sisters.

-In the final document, in addition to the aspects of pastoral practice, there are some "openings", at least in terms of a deep reflection on the ordination of married permanent deacons and a greater participation of women in key roles....

These reflections are also all pastoral considerations generated in view of real needs, requests and concrete situations in the Amazon. For example, the greater participation of women in the life of the Church and in ministries is already taking place, and the Synod has asked for greater recognition. This is the meaning of the exceptional possibility for a permanent deacon, married and with adequate formation, to be ordained priest to serve in communities without access to the Eucharist. This is how we should understand the many proposals throughout the 120 paragraphs of the Final Document; we must appreciate them in their context. What is striking is the careful preparation that has helped so much to have a profound and fruitful Synod.

-There is also talk of a specific liturgical rite for the Amazon, do you agree?

Perhaps many would be surprised to learn that, within the Catholic Church, there are 23 different rites of great antiquity and value, each one responding to a particular history and situation. This special Synod, focused on the Amazon region, has been able to appreciate the faith and values, so it would seem appropriate to develop particular expressions, culturally typified, to facilitate Christian living and evangelization. This proposal is good news that gives me joy.

-Amazon also reminds us of the ecological and environmental aspect of our planet. Why is it important for us to talk about it?

The concept of "integral ecology" served as one of the guidelines for the Synod. Adding the adjective "integral" to "ecology" gives it a challenging twist, because it refers in general to the "wholeness" and unity of that "whole." It is about all essential elements being included and present (none are missing), and about these essential elements being connected or blended together. At the same time, "integral" negates exclusion or isolation. "Integral" gives the idea of ecology greater breadth and weight.

None of the problems and opportunities of the Amazon can be left out of the Church's attention and actions.

-A supposed "ecologist" conception of the Church has been criticized. But in *Laudato si'* the Pope says that "everything in the world is intimately connected". Are these criticisms sincere?

In this context of the Amazon, as Pope Francis emphasizes in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*everything is connected. The social and the natural, the environmental and the pastoral cannot and should not be separated. I do not know what motivates these criticisms, but the Synod is committed to solve this problem, to collaborate

in the "healing" of many vulnerabilities committed in this Amazonian territory. At *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis argues that the world is facing a crisis of survival. *"We need to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate justice issues into environmental discussions, in order to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."*. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor is one cry, and the Church must hear it and weep with them.

-The Holy Father has "promised" a rapid publication of the Apostolic Exhortation. Do you know how it is being prepared?

The preparation is well underway, but I cannot give a precise date for the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation. In the meantime, the Final Document deserves our reading and appreciation: it helps us to get to know the Amazon in a very human and spiritual way, and at the same time leads us to reflect on our own situation as believers and as inhabitants of the planet.

-What do you think of the criticism of the Pope?

The best gift or service one can give a leader is to offer thoughtful and constructive criticism, because the mere status of authority tends to isolate one. Wisdom consists in choosing legitimate criticism and I think the Holy Father does this very well. He is not afraid to say "I was wrong, I'm sorry".

-Do you believe that the "Church on the move", which is close to the least, welcoming, compassionate and forgiving, can have margins of success?

I believe that the Church seeks to put into practice its commitment to the compassion and justice of the Gospel. It is called to observe and understand, and then to dialogue and act. The Church is doing, has always been doing. Accompanying and seeking together: that is what it is all about. The "Church on the move" are those thousands of men and women of faith who, throughout the world, give the Church's merciful and effective response. Because throughout the world they are at the side of those who suffer.

-How do you imagine our world in a few years? How influential do you think the Gospel message will be?

The Christian faith and the Catholic Church continue to grow numerically, so in ten years one can expect the evangelical message to have more reach, more impact. Hopefully. At the same time, we should increasingly put the Second Vatican Council into practice - as the recent Synod of the Amazon has done so much - helping Christians to live and celebrate their faith more authentically. Thank God, Jesus promised us: *"I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."*.

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